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The Girl who Trod on the Loaf

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

I'm sure you have heard about the girl who trod on the loaf so as not to dirty her shoes, and what a dreadful thing happened to her for it. The story has been written, and printed too.

She was a poor child, but proud and haughty; there was a bad drop in her, as the saying is. When she was quite a little girl she took a pleasure in catching flies and pulling off their wings and turning them into creeping things. She would take cockchafers and beetles and stick each of them on a pin and put a green leaf or a little bit of paper to their feet; and the wretched creature caught at it and turned it round and round, trying to get off the pin.

"Now the cockchafer's reading," said little Inger. "Look how he's turning the page!"

And as she grew up she became rather worse than better; but she was pretty, and that was her misfortune, for otherwise she would have been handled very differently to what she was.

"That head of yours wants a sharp snub," said her own mother. "Often enough, when you were a baby, you trampled on my apron; I'm afraid when you grow older you'll often come to trample on my heart."

And so she did indeed.

She went into the country to take service with people of quality, and they treated her as if she had been their own child, and dressed her as such, and she was good to look at, and her pride grew. When she had been there a year her mistress said to her: "You ought for once to go and see your parents, Inger, dear."

So she went, but only to show herself off; they must see how fine she had become. But when she got to the side road, and saw girls and young lads gossiping by the street gutter, and just then her own mother sat down on a stone to rest, with a bundle of sticks she had picked up in the wood, Inger turned back. She was ashamed that she who was dressed out so fine should have such a ragged creature, that picked up sticks, for a mother. She didn't in the least repent of turning back, she was only angry.

Another half-year went by.

"You really ought to go home one day and see your old parents, Inger, dear," said her mistress. "Here's a large wheaten loaf for you; you can take it to them, they will be glad to see you."

Inger put on her best finery and her new shoes, and she held up her skirts and walked most carefully so as to keep neat and clean about the feet—and there was nothing to scold her about in that—but when she came to a place where the path went over marshy ground, and there was water and mud over a long piece of the way, she threw the bread down into the mud to step on it and get across dryshod. But as she stood with one foot on the loaf and lifted the other, the loaf sank down with her deeper and deeper, and she disappeared wholly, and nothing was to be seen but a black bubbling pool.

That's the story.

Where did she go to? Why, she went down to the Marshwoman who brews. The Marshwoman is aunt to the Elf girls—they are well enough known, there are ballads about them and they have had their pictures taken—but about the Marshwoman people only know that when the meadows steam in summer time it is because the Marshwoman is brewing. It was down into her brewery that Inger sank, and that's not a place you can stand for long. The dustbin is a brilliant drawing-room compared with the Marshwoman's brewery. Every vat stinks enough to make you faint away, and the vats stand thick together, and if there is anywhere a tiny opening between them where you could squeeze through, you can't, because of all the damp toads and fat snakes that cluster together there. Down there sank little Inger. All that horrible live mess was so icy cold that she shuddered through all her limbs and stiffened with it more and more. The loaf stuck fast to her and drew her as an amber button draws a bit of straw.

The Marshwoman was at home, and that day the brewery was being visited by the Devil and his great-grandmother; and

she is an ancient and very venomous lady who is never idle. She never goes out without taking her work with her, and she had it with her now. She sewed biting-leather for people's shoes, and they could never be at rest. She embroidered lies and knitted up thoughtless words that had fallen on the ground—all to make mischief and sow trouble. Ah, that old grandmother! She could sew and broider and knit with a vengeance!

She caught sight of Inger and put up her spy-glass to her eye and looked her over again. "That's a girl with something to her," said she. "I must beg her of you for a souvenir of my visit here. She might make a very proper decoration for my great-grandson's front hall."

And she got her: and so it was that little Inger went to Hell. People don't always go there straight off. They may get round by a side way if they have quality.

That front hall was infinitude. You turned giddy with looking before you, and giddy with looking behind you: and there stood a host of the despised, waiting for the door of mercy to be opened; and long might they wait.

Huge fat crawling spiders spun webs of a thousand years about their feet, and these threads cut like thumbscrews and held like chains of copper, and besides that, there was an eternal unrest in every soul, an anguishing unrest. The miser who stood there had forgotten the key of his money box—he knew it was there in the lock. Oh, it would be too much to reckon up all the sorts of torments and pains that were felt there.

Inger felt it horribly, standing as a statue there: she was as it were pinned to the loaf by her foot.

"This comes of trying to keep one's feet clean," said she to herself. "Look how they glare at me!" Yes, they were all looking at her. Their evil desires shone out of their eyes and spoke without sound from their twisted mouths; they were awful to look upon.

"It must be a pleasure to look at me," thought little Inger. "I have a pretty face and nice clothes." And she turned her eyes about—her neck was too stiff to turn. Oh, dear, how muddy she had got in the Marshwoman's brew-house! She had not thought of that. Her clothes were coated over with one great clot of slime. A snake had hung itself in her hair and trailed down her neck, and out of every fold in her dress a toad peeped out and croaked like an asthmatic poodle. It was very uncomfortable. "But everyone else down here looks just as horrible." She comforted herself with that.

Worst of all for her was the dreadful hunger she suffered. Couldn't she manage to stoop and break a bit off the loaf she stood upon? No, her back was perfectly stiff, her arms and hands were stiff, her whole body was like a stone pillar. She could only turn her eyes in her head, turn them right round so that they looked out backwards, and that was a horrid sight. Then came the flies; they crawled to and fro over her eyes. She winked her eyes, but the flies did not fly off, they couldn't, the wings had been pulled off them, they were become creeping things. That was a torture, and the hunger besides—till at last she felt as if her inside had eaten itself up, and she became perfectly empty—excruciatingly empty. "If this goes on much longer, I shan't be able to bear it," said she. But she had to bear it, and it went on.

Then upon her head fell a burning tear. It truckled over her face and bosom, right down to the loaf. Yet another fell: many fell. Who was weeping for little Inger? Why, had she not up there on earth a mother? Tears of grief, such as a mother sheds for her child, always reach it; but they do not set it free, they burn, they make the torment worse. And then, that intolerable hunger, and the being unable to get at the bread she trod on with her foot! At last she had the feeling that everything within her must have eaten itself up, and she was like a thin hollow pipe that drew every sound into itself. She heard plainly everything up there on earth that concerned her, and all she heard was hard and unkind. True, her mother wept sore and sadly, but, besides, she said: "Pride goes before a fall. That was your misfortune, Inger. How have you brought sorrow on your mother!"

Her mother and everyone else up there knew about her sin, how she had trodden on the loaf and had sunk down and disappeared. The cowherd had told of it; he had seen it himself from the hillside.

"How have you brought sorrow on your mother, Inger," said her mother. "Aye. I thought it would be so."

"I wish I had never been born," was Inger's thought at that. "It would have been far better for me. It's no good now, my mother whimpering."

She heard how the gentlefolk, the kind people who had been like father and mother to her, talked about her. "She was a wicked child," they said. "She did not respect God's gifts, but trod them under foot: the gate of mercy will be slow to

open to her."

"Well, they ought to have brought me up better," thought Inger. "Rubbed the corners off me, if I had any." She heard how a whole ballad had been published about her. "The proud girl who stood on the loaf to keep her shoes clean." And it was sung all over the country.

"To think that one should have to bear all that for such a thing, and suffer so much for it," thought Inger, "the rest of them ought to be punished for what they've done. There'd be a nice lot of them to punish. Ugh, how I do suffer!"

And her heart became even more hardened, harder even than herself. "Down here one's not likely to get much better in this company; and I don't want to be better. Look how they glare."

And her heart was angry and savage against all mankind. "They've got something to talk about up there, anyhow. Oh, how I do suffer!"

And she heard them telling her story to children, and how the children called her wicked Inger, she was so horrid, they said, so nasty, she deserved to be punished properly.

There were always hard words about her in the children's mouths. Yet, one day, when anguish and hunger were gnawing deep in her hollow shell, and she heard her name mentioned and her story told to an innocent child, a little girl, she was aware that this little one burst into tears at the story of the proud Inger that loved her finery.

"But won't she ever come up again?" the little girl asked, and the answer was: "No, she'll never come up again."

"But if she begs pardon and never does it again?"

"But she won't beg pardon," they said.

"I do wish she would," said the little girl; and she was quite inconsolable. "I'd give my doll's house if only she might come up. It is so dreadful for poor Inger."

And these words came straight into Inger's heart, and seemed as if they did her good. It was the first time that anybody had said "Poor Inger" and not added a word about her wrongdoing. Here was a little innocent child that prayed and wept for her, and she felt so strange that she would fain have wept herself; but weep she could not, and that too was a torment.

As the years went by up there, there was no change down below. She heard voices from above less often, there was less talk about her. Then one day she was aware of a sigh: "Inger! Inger! What sorrow you have brought me! I said you would." It was her mother dying.

From time to time she heard her name mentioned by her old masters, and the kindest word was when the mistress said: "Shall I ever see you again, Inger, I wonder? One does not know whither one may go."

But Inger knew well enough that her kindly mistress could never come to that place where she was.

Again a length of time passed by, slow and bitter.

Then Inger heard her name spoken again, and saw above her as it were two bright stars shining. They were two gentle eyes that were closing on earth. So many years had rolled by since the time when the little girl had cried for poor Inger and could not be comforted, that that child was become an old woman, whom God was now calling to Himself; and just at that hour when the thoughts of a whole life were rising before her, she remembered too how as a little child she had cried bitterly at hearing the story of Inger. That moment and that impression stood in living light before the old woman at her death-hour, and she broke out, quite aloud: "Lord, my God, have not I, like Inger, often trampled on Thy blessed gifts, and thought nothing of them? Have not I too often borne about pride in my heart? But in Thy mercy Thou hast not let me sink down, but hast held me up: loose not Thine hold in my last hour."

And the old eyes closed, and the eyes of the soul opened to that which is hidden: and since Inger was so vividly present to her last thoughts, she beheld her, saw to what a depth she had been dragged down; and at the sight the saintly soul burst into tears. She stood, a child, in the kingdom of heaven and wept for poor Inger. The tears and the prayers rang like an echo down into the hollow, empty shell that shut in the imprisoned tortured soul—and it was overwhelmed by all that undreamt of love that came from above. An Angel of God was weeping for her! How had that been vouchsafed to her?

The tortured soul gathered up as it were in its thought every deed it had wrought in its earth life, and shook with weeping such as had never come to Inger there. She was filled full with sorrow for herself; she thought that never for her could the gate of mercy be opened; and as, in deepest contrition, she acknowledged it, in that instant a ray shone down into the heart of the abyss. The ray came with a force stronger than the sunbeam that thaws the snowman which the boys have raised in the yard; and then, far more swiftly than the snowflake that falls on a child's warm mouth melts and drops, the stiffened shape of Inger dissolved in vapour—and a little bird shot with the zig-zag of a lightning flash up into the world of men. But it was fearful, and shy of all around it; it was shamefaced in its own sight and in the sight of all living things, and in all haste it sought shelter in a dark hole that it found in a ruined wall. Here it sat crouching down and quivering over all its body. No sound of voice could it utter, for it had none; long it sat there before it could look about quietly and perceive all the beauty that was outside. Beauty indeed there was; the air was fresh and mild, the moon shone clear, the trees and bushes sent forth fragrance, and it was so comfortable where it sat—its kirtle of feathers so clean and delicate. Ah, how all created things stood forth, born in love and beauty! All the thoughts that stirred within the bird's breast would have sung themselves forth, but the bird had no power for that; it would fain have sung like the cuckoo and the nightingale in spring. Yet God, who hears even the soundless praise of the worm, was aware of the song of praise here, which rose in chords of thanksgiving, as the psalm rang in the heart of David before it was clothed in words and music.

For days and weeks these voiceless songs grew and swelled; burst forth they must at the first flap of the wing towards a deed of good; and that must be achieved.

Now came round the holy feast of Christmas. The farmer set up a pole close by the wall, and tied on it an unthreshed sheaf of oats, that the birds of heaven too might have a merry Christmas and a cheerful meal at this the Saviour's own season.

The sun rose on Christmas morning and shone on the oat-sheaf, and all the twittering birds flew about the dinner-pole; and from the wall too there sounded a "twit-twit". The swelling thoughts were turned into sound, and the faint twitter was a whole hymn of joy. The thought of a good deed was awakened, and the bird flew out of its shelter. In heaven they knew well enough what bird that was.

The winter took fast hold. The waters were frozen thick: birds and wood-beasts had a hard time for food. The little bird flew off to the high road, and there in the wake of the sledges it sought and found every here and there a grain; at the baiting-places it would find a few crumbs of bread. It would eat only one of these itself, and call to all the other hungry sparrows that here they could find food. It flew to the towns and spied round about, and wherever a kindly hand had strewn bread by the window for the birds, it would eat but a single crumb, and give all else to the others.

In the course of the winter the bird had gathered and given away so many breadcrumbs that, weighed together, they made up as much as the whole loaf that little Inger had trodden on so as not to dirty her shoes. And when the last crumb had been found and given away, the grey wings of the bird whitened and spread out.

"There's a tern flying away over the lake!" said the children who saw the white bird. Now it dipped down into the lake, now it rose into the bright sunshine which shone so that it was not possible to see what became of it. They said that it flew straight into the sun.

[End of *The Girl who Trod on the Loaf* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]